

BIBLE IN A YEAR

**THE READING PLAN IS TAKEN FROM
“READING GOD’S STORY: ONE-YEAR CHRONOLOGICAL PLAN” BY YOU VERSION**

**Links to Bible Text are through www.biblegateway.com using the
English Standard Version**

2018

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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October 1, 2018
A DARK ENDING

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 11-13, Psalm 126

I grew up watching Star Wars as a kid and it is generally accepted that *The Empire Strikes Back* is the best of the original trilogy, if not the best in the entire series. It's a very dark movie. Evil is on the move and in fact, seems to be winning. The end of this second installment finds the heroes in disarray. Luke Skywalker has lost a hand and his innocence as he finds out Darth Vader is his father. Han Solo has been captured and frozen in carbon so he can be delivered to Jabba the Hut. Leia, Chewbacca, the droids, and Lando aren't quite sure what to do and the hopes of the rebellion seem very slim. It's all a set up of course. The final installment of the series will see the heroes overcome all these obstacles to win an improbable victory against a seemingly invincible enemy. Stop me if this plot seems familiar at all.

The Old Testament – whether you read it chronologically as we have this year or you simply read the books in order – doesn't end well. Israel is in disarray. Despite their return to the Promised Land, they simply cannot get it right. They are unable to remain faithful. They intermarry. They profane the Sabbath. They worship other gods. The whole point of the Old Testament on some level is to drive us to complete and total despair. To bring us to the end of ourselves. The end of our strength. The end of our resources. The end of our wisdom so we will cry out for God. It's to prepare God's people for the coming of the Savior who is Jesus Christ. Because it is impossible for us to remain faithful, He must do it for us. Because it is impossible for us to obey God's Law, He must do it for us. Because the sacrifices are only temporary, Jesus must become the perfect sacrifice on our behalf. Hanging between heaven and earth. Representing both God and humanity. He intercedes for us even as He takes our place.

If you are wired like me, you find the end of the Old Testament incredibly unsatisfying. It goes over like a lead balloon. A wet blanket. It just leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The reason I feel this way is because deep down I want to believe I can be a good person. Deep down I want to believe that if I work hard enough, stay disciplined enough, read the Bible enough, pray enough, worship enough, you name it; I can work my way to God. I can find favor with Him. I can earn His praise. But Ephesians 2:8-9 confronts me with the truth, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Saved by grace. Saved through faith which itself is a gift from God. None of my works matter in the grand scheme of thing because God will not allow me to boast in anything except Christ.

We've spent nine months in the Old Testament. It's a long, hard slog no doubt. We have watched the same pattern repeats itself over and over again. God raises up His people only to watch them fall into sin. Adam and Eve. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. Moses and the Exodus. Joshua and the Judges. Samuel and Saul. David and Bathsheba. On and on the list goes until you get to Ezra, Nehemiah and the Exiles. All of them sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of them are like sheep who have gone astray. All of them unworthy of anything but God's judgment. So how does God respond?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

October 2, 2018
READING THE BIBLE WHOLISTICALLY

Readings for the day: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14

For decades, maybe even a few centuries, there has been a strong push among biblical scholars to break the Bible down into its component parts. To atomize the Scriptures so we can get to the truth. To divorce each word, each phrase, each passage from the rest of the material around it so we can put it under the microscope. When I was in seminary we were taught to stay within the text. To stay within the particular chapter we were reading. We most certainly were not encouraged and, in some cases, not allowed to draw from other books of the Bible to make our exegetical case. Such efforts were dismissed in favor of a “dis-integrated” approach that frees the interpreter from the constraints of the overarching narrative.

The problem, of course, is this notion is completely foreign to the Biblical authors themselves. Clearly whoever composed Psalm 106 had no trouble drawing on material from all over the Bible as he prayed to God. Egypt. Exodus. The wilderness wandering. A golden calf. The great sin at Peor and the valiant actions of Phinehas to stay the plague. The conquest of Canaan. Inhabiting the Promised Land. Kingdom. Exile. Return. He basically is telling and re-telling the story of Israel as he prays. Recounting the great faithfulness of God as he remembers and cries out for salvation once again. He understands his place the larger narrative. He understands his role in the larger story. He sees Scripture “wholistically” and draws great comfort from the text.

Jesus himself took this approach. He saw the Scriptures a “unified” whole that could not be separated or broken down into hermetically sealed little packages, one having nothing to do with the other. Listen to what he tells two disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection. “And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:25-27) Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection makes no sense if it is not connected to the larger story of God’s salvation. The greater plan God has been working out since the foundations of the world. Jesus’ birth seems random and even capricious – at least to Mary - unless it remains anchored in the prophetic witness of the Old Testament. Jesus’ teaching seems like it comes out of left field unless it remains linked to the Law of God revealed on Mt. Sinai. The cross - divorced from the context of the Old Testament system of sacrifices - becomes a horror rather than a hope. The resurrection, rather than sounding the death-knell of sin and death and evil, becomes this strange, other-worldly, super-spiritual, psychosomatic event that doesn’t really change much at all.

It is without question that every single author of every single book of the Bible believed with all their heart, soul, and mind that the events they recorded were part of the eternal plan of God. The Apostle John especially understood this great truth when he wrote these immortal words, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) With the advent of Jesus, John knew the world had changed. The curtain had closed, so to speak, on human history as God Himself took the stage. Light now shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. Good stood toe to toe with evil and backed him down. God had now entered our world of brokenness to mend it and make it whole. And the great news for all of us is this, “To all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God, who are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13)

October 3, 2018
PROMISE KEEPER

Readings for the day: Matthew 1, Luke 1-2:38

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet..." (Matthew 1:22)

God always delivers on His promises. God is always faithful to His covenant. God is always true to His Word. The birth of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan. This is the primary message of the gospels. It is why Matthew begins with a long genealogy tracing all the way back to Abraham. It's why Luke will trace his genealogy all the way back to Adam. It's why all the gospel writers connect the miraculous birth of Jesus to the promises God gave to the prophets. Matthew cites Isaiah and the virgin who will conceive. Luke summarizes Malachi and the one will come in the spirit of Elijah. It's why Mary and Zechariah both sing songs recalling the great things God has done.

The advent of Jesus reveals the full measure of God's radical commitment to His creation. To the people who bear His image in the world. The advent of Jesus is God's "Yes" to our rebellious and defiant "No." He is God's declaration of unconditional love and grace and mercy. He is God's affirmation in the face of our fear. He is God's acceptance in the face of our loneliness and struggle. He is God's answer to all our questions.

The road to Jesus was a long and winding one. All one has to do is go through the list of names Matthew sets out and recall their stories. Each of them is broken in their own way. Each of them struggled with fear, uncertainty, pain, and heartbreak. Each of them struggled and suffered. None of them are clean or pure or holy in and of themselves. And yet God uses all of them to tell His story of salvation. God uses the barrenness of Abraham and Sarah. The incest of Tamar. The prostitution of Rahab. And an unclean Moabite named Ruth. God uses the adultery of David and Bathsheba. The arrogance of Rehoboam that divides a kingdom. And the blasphemous idolatry of Ahaz and Manasseh that leads to exile. God uses another barren couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth to prepare the way for His Only Begotten Son who will be born of a young virgin named Mary who is betrothed to a poor carpenter named Joseph. This is the lineage of Jesus. It is dysfunctional. Full of brokenness and sin. And yet it is through this rather ordinary line of people that God makes good on His promise to bring salvation to the world.

What about you? What is your story? What is your life like? What is your family like? What skeletons lie deep in your closet? What fears keep you locked up inside? What wounds do you carry? What dysfunctions do you grapple with? And how have you seen God at work through it all? Or do you see God at work through it all? Friends, the promise of the gospel is this...In Christ, God works together all things – ALL THINGS – for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Cling to the promise of Christ today! Trust in the promise of Christ today! Believe in the promise of Christ today!

October 4, 2018
FAVOR WITH GOD

Readings for the day: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. Wise men from the east. Probably pagan astrologers who watched the skies over Babylon. Men who possibly had been raised on the stories of their fabled Jewish forebears, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come to Israel following a star. The heavenly sign was so compelling they traveled who knows how many miles over how many weeks to worship and offer gifts to a newborn king.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. The king of Israel. Descendent of Esau through his father who had converted, Herod was raised a Jew. However, he was not of the Davidic line and therefore was considered a pretender at best to the throne. Furthermore, he reigned at the whim of Caesar, his first allegiance being to the Roman Empire rather than Yahweh. He received the news the wise men brought and was troubled. The news of a new king being born would be a threat to his own power. So he marshals his forces and lays waste to the entire region surrounding Bethlehem, killing all the male children under two years of age.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. Joseph and Mary are traveling home from their annual trek to Jerusalem. After they make camp for the night, they realize Jesus is not with them. He has remained behind. So back they go frantic in their search for their now 12 year old son. For three days, they searched high and low throughout the city only to find him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. "Why have you treated us like this?" Why disrespect us? Why not obey us? Why did you not come when it was time to go? Their anger and frustration is palpable. And Jesus humbles himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. The Heavenly Father looks down on His Son. Sees him in danger and sends an angel to warn his parents. Sees him at the Temple listening and learning from the teachers of the Law. Sees him as he grows up under the love and guidance of Joseph and Mary. The Father sees it all and grants the Son favor. Blessing. Wisdom. Strength. Preparing him for the day when he would launch his ministry. Laying the groundwork for what's to come.

What's your reaction to Jesus? How do you receive Him? Is it with a glad heart? Do you feel yourself compelled to seek Him and grow a relationship with Him like the wise men? Is it fear? Do you, like Herod, respond in fear and anxiety to the idea that Jesus would be your Lord and Savior? Is it frustration? Like Joseph and Mary, does Jesus sometimes confound your expectations? Or do you respond with love and devotion? Is Jesus finding greater "favor" with you with each passing year?

October 5, 2018
JOHN THE BAPTIST

Readings for the day: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Malachi 4:5-6)

John the Baptist is one of the most fascinating figures in all the Bible. He is Elijah reborn. The one whom Malachi prophesied would prefigure the coming of the Messiah. He is the messenger. The final Old Testament prophet. Like the prophets of old, he lives an ascetic lifestyle. He dwells in the desert. Survives on locusts and wild honey. Wears clothing made from wild camel hide. From birth, he was set apart as a Nazarite which meant no wine touched his lips nor would he cut his hair. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and he was sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

John preached a message of repentance. In keeping with his prophetic forebears, he pulled no punches. He showed no fear. In the face of political and religious opposition, he spoke the truth. He called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. He called out the immoral behavior of Herod the tetrarch. He called out the sins of the people as they came to be baptized. He called them to obedience. Called them to surrender. To sacrifice. To devote their lives to Yahweh. And revival began sweeping the region.

God called John to serve a very special purpose. Though it meant prison. Though it would eventually cost him his life. John was called to prepare the way for Jesus. To make His path straight. To lift up every valley. To tear down every mountain. To straighten out the crooked and smooth the rough edges. He was called to lay the groundwork for the ministry of the Messiah so that all people might see the salvation of God. His calling was not to fame. Fortune. Safety. Security. Comfort. Peace. As soon as his ministry gets rolling, he hands it off. As soon as he is becoming popular, Jesus shows up on the scene. As soon as he really starts getting traction, he steps aside.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) This is our calling as well. To step aside. To get out of the limelight. To do all we can to point everyone to Christ. It may not make us popular. It may not gain us fame or fortune or a good reputation. It may cost us some of our rights. Some of our freedoms. Some of us may indeed be put in prison. Some of us indeed may lose our lives. (Not necessarily here in America but certainly in many places around the world.) The calling John received from God has been given to the church. To preach the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. To call people to repentance before the Lord. To call people to surrender their lives to Jesus before it's too late. Before the day of judgment comes. Before the ax is laid to the root of the tree and the wicked are cut off. We too must make straight the path for Jesus. We too must lift up every valley. Tear down every mountain. Straighten out the crooked and smooth over the rough edges. In short, we must do all we can to remove every barrier to Christ. We must ourselves get out of the way so that others will see Jesus.

October 6, 2018
TEMPTATION

Readings for the day: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-2:12

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15)

Jesus was fully human. He took on a fully human nature. With all its weaknesses. All its brokenness. All its vulnerabilities. As such, He knew temptation. He knew the temptation to provide for Himself. To satisfy His own needs. To put Himself above the will of His Father. "Command these stones to become loaves of bread." He knew the temptation to make a name for Himself. To perform spectacular feats and miraculous deeds in an effort to extend His "brand." To lift His name up above that of His Father. "Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple." He knew the temptation to compromise. To accomplish His Father's will by means other than the cross. "I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory if you will but worship me." Jesus suffered these temptations and more throughout His life and ministry. And yet, He remained without sin. He remained faithful. Steadfast in His love for His Heavenly Father.

Can you imagine the frustration of the devil? Here is his chance. Here is his opportunity to wreck it all. To take down the very Son of God and destroy the eternal plan of God. He knows he's no match for God. He knows he is a created being. He knows he exists only because God's mysterious will allows for it. And yet, he is so bitter and angry and prideful, he wants to do all he can to kill and destroy that which God loves. And what does God love most? His Only Begotten Son. So if the devil can get to Him. Get Him to sin. Corrupt Him in some way, shape or form. Turn Him from the cross then he wins. But Jesus sees right through his schemes. He raises the shield of faith and extinguishes every single flaming dart of the evil one. He counters every thrust with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and parries every blow. And what happens? The devil flees.

Friends, you and I face temptation every single day. 1 John 2:16 describes it as "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" and these things are not from the Father but are of the world. They are part and parcel of our experience as human beings. It is a weakness we bear from conception. A vulnerability we all share due to our broken, sinful, fallen natures. None of us escapes. None of us is immune. The temptations may take on different forms or different shapes but, at their root, they remain the same. Learning to identify and then resist temptation is a key part of the Christian life. It is one of the keys to deeper intimacy with Christ.

How does one resist temptation? How does one take their stand – as Christ did – against the devil and put him to flight? We do what Jesus did. First and foremost, we cultivate a deep and intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father. Through prayer. Meditation on God's Word. Worship with God's people. Regular participation in the sacraments. These ordinary means of grace become extraordinary sources of strength when temptation comes. They are the wells we draw on for water when the devil would put us under siege. Second, we identify the lies the devil is trying to get us to believe. Lies about ourselves. Lies about who God is. Lies about life in this world. The devil is the "father of lies" according to Scripture and he is constantly seeking to deceive us so we will fall into his traps. Third, we counter the enemy's lies with the truth of God's Word. When tempted towards self-reliance, we remind ourselves every good gift comes from God. When tempted towards self-promotion, we remind ourselves it is God who lifts up and exalts those He loves. When tempted towards self-protection, we remind ourselves it is God who is our fortress, our sanctuary, our Protector. When tempted to build our self-esteem, we remind ourselves we are not our own. We were bought with a price. When tempted to focus on our self-image, we cling to the truth that we were made in the image of God. These temptations are all around us.

We are inundated by them every single hour of every single day. Social media. Peer interactions. The different voices in our heads. We are under constant bombardment to define ourselves outside of Christ.

And that is why the writer of Hebrews is so quick to remind us that our great High Priest is faithful. Jesus, though tempted in every way as we are, remains without sin. He lives to intercede for us for He knows the struggle is real. He knows the power of your compulsions and addictions and predilections. He knows what draws you away from Him. And He is faithful to strengthen us. He stands ready to guide and protect us. He is with you always. Even to the end of the age.

October 8, 2018
REFLECTING JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44

"So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them." (Matthew 4:24)

The news broke today of a dramatic increase in suicide threats being reported in my home state of Colorado. A ninefold increase in the last six years. It's heartbreaking. And it only confirms what I hear from law enforcement and professional therapists in our area about rates of depression and anxiety skyrocketing, particularly among young people. Adding to this toxic brew are climbing rates of substance abuse. Recent studies show Colorado ranks #1 among all 50 states when it comes to opioid painkillers, alcohol, cocaine and marijuana. Deaths related to overdose increased significantly from 2002-2015 with 904 Coloradans dying from drug use and 847 from alcohol in 2015 alone. According to an article posted on drugrehab.com -

(<https://www.drugrehab.com/colorado/trends>) - Colorado is home to some of the worst rates of drug-related deaths in the country. It's tragic and terrifying.

I have felt for a few years now that we are seeing the beginnings of a tsunami of pain that is just starting to hit our shores. Our children are suffering and dying all around us. Our culture is filled with an increasing amount of rage and anger. Death threats are now common against those who disagree. (Witness what Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh's family are both going through at the moment.) It seems like everything is taken to the extreme. It makes for a very hostile and dangerous environment. Of course it must be acknowledged that what seems new to many of us has been the normative experience for so many of our friends of color or members of the LGBTQ community. They have lived with these threats for decades or more. But is this all there is? Are we doomed to live our lives under such threats? Constantly withdrawing or drawing our boundaries ever tighter in order to protect those we love? Or is there a different way?

First century culture in Palestine was little different than our own. Pharisees. Saduccees. Essenes. Herodians. Roman collaborators. It was a divided society where different religious/political factions dotted the landscape. Each vying for power. Each seeking supremacy so they could eradicate their opposition. This was the world into which Jesus was born. This was the world in which Jesus launched his ministry. And what a ministry it was! So different than all the rest! Jesus welcomed the outcast. Ate with sinners. Spent time with the ritually unclean. He lifted up women. He cleansed lepers. He restored the isolated and lonely to community. As his fame grew, many people came from all over to bring him their sick. Their diseased. Their hurting. Their wounded. The demon-possessed were set free. He healed all their afflictions. And this only drew more hurting people to him. God was glorified. The Kingdom drew near. Salvation came to so many. All in the name of Jesus.

Could the church serve a similar role today? What if the church made it her aim to serve her community? To go out each and every week – having been filled and equipped in worship - to share the good news of the gospel? Bring healing in Jesus' name? Freedom in Jesus' name? Hope in Jesus' name? What if the church was known as a refuge? A place of safety and security amidst the turmoil and violence of our world? What if the church was known for love rather than hate, even as she called the community around her to greater faithfulness? Would not the fame of Jesus increase? Would not people be drawn to the care and comfort we provide? What if we laid aside our internal theological fights and squabbles and instead linked arms to serve? What if we stopped stabbing our wounded in the back and instead embraced grace as a way of life? What if we put aside our need for political influence and power and instead sought to prayerfully and thoughtfully engage across the political spectrum? And what stops us? Why not start right now? Even today?

Friends, true followers of Jesus should be known more by what they're for than what they're against. Jesus was certainly against many things in his day but he was known for his love and compassion and ministry among the poor. The outcast. The sinner. What is your church known for? And how can you – as a member of that local church - represent Christ more faithfully today?

October 9, 2018
IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

Readings for the day: John 3-5

From the moment I was saved on the campus of the University of Colorado up in Boulder, I've had a passion to share Christ with others. I evangelized my family. My college buddies. My co-workers after college. I even found myself evangelizing while at Princeton Theological Seminary if you can believe it! Over the years, I've shared with Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons. More recently in my trips to Africa, I've encountered and shared Christ with those who follow more traditional tribal beliefs. And the one thing I've learned over the years is this...it really is all about Jesus.

I remember meeting with Mormon missionaries in college. Every year I would walk up to their information desk the first week of school and ask to meet. I would be up front and honest with them about my motivations. I wasn't interested in converting but rather having a dialogue about the differences between Christianity and Mormonism. It is tempting in these conversations to major in the minors. To talk about all the esoteric beliefs they hold to vis a vis our own. None of those conversations bore much fruit to be honest. Where we really gained traction is when we started talking about Jesus. Is He God? Or simply the Son of God? Is He the Creator? Or a created being just like us? Is He the Word Incarnate? Or just an enlightened teacher?

Today's reading makes it clear how Jesus saw Himself...

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.

For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him." (John 5:19-23, 26-27, 30, 43)

These are stunning claims that would have put Jesus right in the crosshairs of the religious leaders of His day. They knew He was claiming to be God. Claiming a kinship with the Father that was unique to Himself. Indeed, just a few chapters later in John, Jesus will sum it all up by stating, "I and the Father are one." Not just in spirit. Not just of one mind or one accord. But actually one in essence. In being. Which is why the Jews pick up stones to kill Him for blasphemy.

My Mormon friends and I went round and round on this point. Is Jesus God? My Muslim friends and I have gone round and round on this point as well since they revere Jesus as a prophet. But Jesus isn't just an enlightened teacher. Jesus isn't just a great prophet like the others mentioned in the Bible. Jesus isn't just one of the sons of God. He actually is God! As such, He alone has the power to give us new life! He alone has the authority to judge! He alone can raise the dead! He alone can deliver us from sin and evil! And if we still harbor doubts, Jesus calls witnesses to His defense. "If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father

who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." (John 5:31-32, 36-40)

Friends, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan of salvation. He is the one to whom all human history points. He is the climax of the covenant. He is the telos of the Law. He is the capstone of creation. He is the Alpha and Omega. The First and Last. The Beginning and the End. All who believe in Him shall be saved. All who reject Him stand already condemned. This was his message to Nicodemus. To the woman at the well. To the man at the pool in Bethesda. It is His message to us as well.

October 10, 2018
LORD, HELP ME GET ONE MORE

Readings for the day: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2, 3:1-21, Luke 5:12-39, 6:1-19

One of my favorite movies is Hacksaw Ridge. It tells the story of Demond Doss who won the Medal of Honor for his courage during the Battle of Okinawa where he single-handedly saved 75 men. Doss was a combat medic who famously became a conscientious objector and refused to carry a weapon or kill an enemy soldier even in self-defense. Doss was persecuted for his devout Christian beliefs. He was frequently abused as his superiors attempted to drum him out of the army. He was even court-martialed. However, he persevered and served with great distinction. He won several awards for valor as he rushed into the heat of battle to save lives. His greatest moment came when his company attacked and tried to capture Hacksaw Ridge. They were met by a deadly counterattack by the Japanese and less than a third of the men made it safely down the cliff face to safety. Doss stayed behind. He prayed, "Lord, help me get one more." And back onto the battlefield he went. Dragging one man after another to safety and lowering them down the cliff. For twelve hours he worked. Saving one soldier every ten minutes. It was truly miraculous. On May 5, 1945, as the army formed up to retake the ridge, they waited for Doss to finish his devotions and pray for them before going into battle. It was the Sabbath day. Doss was wounded four times on Okinawa. He saved lives by taking the brunt of a grenade blast which left shrapnel in his arm. While being evacuated, he saw a wounded soldier and rolled off the stretcher to treat him. He gave up his stretcher for the man and while he waited, was shot by a sniper. Desperately wounded, he crawled 300 yards to an aid station under heavy fire where he was rescued.

What does this movie have to do with Jesus? I truly believe when God looks down on the earth, He sees a war raging. A battlefield strewn with the bodies of those he loves. They are broken. Wounded. Hurting. Struggling to survive. Lepers. Paralytics. Withered hands. Blind. Deaf. Lame. We come in all shapes and sizes and all of us are under relentless, ruthless attack by the enemy. Into this world steps Jesus. He prays to His Heavenly Father, "help me get one more." Lepers are cleansed. Paralytics rise and walk. Withered hands are restored. Blind receive sight. Deaf hear. The lame dance. The enemy tries to stop him. They accuse Him of blasphemy. Eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. Working on the Sabbath. But Jesus came for the sick not the well. He came for the sinners not the self-righteous. Jesus prizes mercy over sacrifice. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus would eventually be killed for His beliefs. He would give His life on a Cross.

The world is still a battlefield. A war rages all around us each and every day. The enemy's attacks are relentless and ruthless. The devil wants to cause as much pain as he possibly can. He seeks to devour and destroy all God loves. Into this world, Jesus sends His people. To be His hands and feet. To come alongside the lost and lonely and hurting in our world. To bring healing and hope in His name. The church is like a MASH unit in the midst of this great spiritual battle. And Jesus sends us out to save lives one at a time. Is it dangerous? Yes. Will it be costly? Yes. Will we find ourselves tired and exhausted at times? Absolutely. Wounded along the way? You bet. But our passion for the casualties of this war must outweigh our comfort. Our sense of safety and well-being. Christ gave His life for us. Are we not called to give the same in return? Today, and everyday, may your prayer be as you leave your home, "Lord, help me get just one more."

October 11, 2018
BUILDING A LIFE THAT WILL LAST

Readings for the day: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:24-27)

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. Period. In it, Jesus casts His vision for His Kingdom. He defines what life looks like under His rule and reign. He sets boundaries around human desire and behavior to protect us from self-destruction and to teach us how to build a life that will last forever. Sadly, too many of us believe we can choose our own path. Defiantly, we try to chart our own course into eternity. Foolishly, we attempt to bushwhack our way through the wilderness of this world only to quickly lose our way. The results are tragic and heartbreaking.

I wonder sometimes why we find our culture's pact with sin and death so enticing. What is it about our culture that draws us in? We all know it's not good for us. We all know the pace we're setting isn't healthy. We all are feeling the effects of isolation and loneliness. We all are struggling under the pressure that's been created and exasperated through social media. So why do we persist? Why can't we seem to opt out? Are we truly so addicted we cannot stop?

How many families have to break up? How many pills do we have to take? How many children have to die before we wake up from the nightmare we find ourselves in? When will we stop believing the lie that life is all about me? All about my wants? All about my desires? The world tells us to "follow your heart" and "be true to yourself." I can think of nothing more devastating. The world tells us we "can be whoever we want to be" and to do "whatever feels good." I can think of nothing more heartbreaking. Do we not see the pain we are leaving in our wake? The broken relationships? And for what? So we can selfishly pursue our own happiness at the expense of others? Do we not see the toll this is taking? The high price we are paying? The cost to those around us, especially those we love most?

I meet them every single day. In coffee shops and bars all over town. Men and women and children who are suffering. Struggling. Wrestling with a deep sense of existential loneliness because they have tried their best to do this life on their own. They "believed in themselves" but that belief took them nowhere. Like Sinatra, they did life "my way" only to find themselves at a dead end. They tried to be the captain of their own destiny. The master of their own fate. The ruler of their own domain only to discover their reach far exceeded their grasp. In the words of Jesus, they built their entire lives on sand and their ruin was great.

Perhaps that describes you today. You are looking around at the ruins of your marriage. The ruins of your family. The ruins of your professional career. Your bank account is overdrawn. Your energy levels are dangerously low. Your emotional reserves are tapped out. Your relationships are broken. Your heart is aching. And you feel so very alone. Depressed. Angry. Frustrated. Anxious. Afraid. Perhaps you've even been tempted to put an end to it all. Don't believe the lie! God is with you! Even in the valley of the shadow! Even in the darkest of nights! His presence is always there to comfort and to guide and to bring us back into the light!

How do we get from here to there? We start building on the rock. We start by surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and take up residence within us so He may transform us from the inside out. Only God can re-orient the desires of our hearts! Only God can re-prioritize the values of our lives!

Only God can redirect our loves. As He does this deep work in us, what comes out of us begins to change. Life on the outside begins to reflect the new life that's emerging on the inside. Regenerate actions flow from a regenerated heart. New wine is poured from new wine skins as God removes our hearts of stone and gives us new hearts that beat for Him alone!

How do we know if we've received this new heart? Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than treat it as a list of "do's and don'ts" instead consider it more of a diagnostic. Let the words of Jesus dissect your every thought. Your every deed. Your every emotion. Let it stand like a plumb line in your life against which you are constantly measuring yourself. Not because you must earn God's favor but because you long to bring glory to God. Not because you have to follow some law but because you want to chart the progress the Holy Spirit is making in sanctifying you for His Kingdom. Not because you have to clean yourself up before God can love you or accept you but because you trust He has already done so and is hard at work to present you blameless before His throne.

One can spend a lifetime learning from these few chapters and still never arrive. This isn't about perfection, friends. It's about the journey. It's about following the way of Jesus. And if you are like most, you will find yourself stumbling down the road like a drunk man, swaying from one side to the other. That's okay. That's actually quite normal. The key is to keep walking down the road.

October 12, 2018
A DINNER PARTY WITH JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

Imagine you're having Jesus over for dinner. You send out invitations. Line up a caterer. Clean your house. Put out tables and chairs. Light your scented candles. Maybe even spring for some live music. You leave nothing to chance. You want Him to be impressed. The day of the affair arrives. Your home is packed with people. These are your friends. Your colleagues. Your family. All of whom cannot wait to meet Jesus. He walks in. What do you do? Do you greet Him? Offer to take His coat? Get Him a drink? Give Him the seat of honor? Do you make sure to serve Him first as your guest? Introduce Him to all your friends by name? Make sure He feels welcomed and honored? Of course you would. You would be embarrassed if you didn't. Your friends would be ashamed of you.

Let's take it up a notch. Imagine what would happen if a homeless man wandered in to your home that evening. Or a prostitute. Or a drug addict. Imagine them disrupting things. Imagine the crowd parting as people stumble over themselves so they don't have to touch them. Imagine the room going silent and all eyes turning to you to see how you will respond. Now imagine those same eyes shifting to Jesus as the homeless man/prostitute/drug addict falls at His feet. Weeping. Shedding so many tears, Jesus' feet literally become drenched. Now imagine the homeless man taking out a dirty handkerchief to wipe His shoes. The prostitute letting her hair down to dry his feet. The drug addict using his ratty t-shirt. You would probably be uncomfortable with the whole scene. Unsure of what to do or how to respond. Embarrassed by their behavior. After all, this whole affair is supposed to be about impressing Jesus!

Imagine Jesus turns to you and tells you a story. Two people went into deep debt to a loan shark. One for five hundred thousand and the other for fifty. Neither could afford to pay. In a shocking move, the loan shark forgave both their debts. Which would love him more? The one who owed him the greater amount, of course. This homeless man. This woman of the night. This poor addict struggle with many things. Their lives are a train wreck. Your life, on the other hand, is good. You live in a nice home. You are surrounded by people who love and respect you. You make a good living. You enjoy some of the finer things of life. Yes, you know you are not perfect. Yes, you have your own struggles. Yes, life is not always easy. But you have been given much whereas this man. This woman. This addict have been given little. And even what little they did have has been squandered away. Who do you think will love Me more?

The one who is forgiven much, loves much. The one who is forgiven little, loves little. Friends, ask the Father to show you the full measure of your sin. Ask Him to show you how far you have fallen short of His glory. Not so that you will despair but so you can more deeply appreciate the sacrifice He made to save you! God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it! NO! He sent Jesus so the world might be saved through Him! All of us from the richest to the poorest. From the most privileged to the most oppressed. Perpetrators and victims alike need forgiveness. We all need grace. And Jesus stands ready to offer it to us in abundance! Know your sins have been forgiven and let that fan the flames of your devotion to Jesus!

October 13, 2018
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Readings for the day: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

It's one of the most challenging questions I face as a pastor and believer in Jesus Christ. How can a good God allow evil and suffering in the world? My atheist friends rightly press the question even further. "The existence of evil and suffering in the world leaves two possibilities...either your God is good but not all-powerful. Impotent in the face of evil and suffering. Helpless to stop it. Or your God is all-powerful but not good because He chooses not to step in. Either way, your God ceases to be god. Heads we win, tails you lose."

The Pharisees and religious leaders were essentially asking Jesus the same thing. Does He truly have the power and authority to defeat evil? And is His power good? Does it come from God? The reason they asked these questions is because they had just seen Jesus perform an exorcism. It's not the first time. They've probably heard reports of other miracles of deliverance. But now they are seeing it with their own eyes. A mute man released. Set free. Words literally tumbling out of his mouth. It's like everything he's wanted to say for so many years comes rushing out in a torrent all at once. Exorcism wasn't a common practice in Israel in those days but it wasn't unknown either. There were other Jewish exorcists running around, claiming to cast out demons but something about the way Jesus did it was different. The power and authority He exercised was clearly unique and set the religious leaders on edge. What were they seeing? The demons obeyed this man's every word. What did that mean? Grasping for understanding, they accused Jesus of being in league with Satan or Beelzebul himself. Perhaps the reason the demons obeyed is because Jesus' power came from the prince of demons? Jesus shoots that theory down. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Why would Satan fight against himself? That leaves only one other option. Jesus is confronting evil and darkness and the devil with the power of God.

Now we enter really dangerous territory. If the Kingdom of God has come. If Jesus is casting out demons by the finger of God Himself. If the Holy Spirit is at work in these miracles then to deny them is to deny God Himself! An unforgivable sin! An unpardonable offense! If the religious leaders persist in their skepticism and unbelief, they will find themselves on the outside looking in when the Kingdom of God finally comes. This is why Jesus is so confrontational with them at the end of Luke 11. He wants them to believe. He wants them to come around. He wants them to lay aside their skepticism and disbelief and embrace Him as the Son of God and Son of Man. To see what He's doing as the work of God in confronting evil and suffering. To see what He's doing as the goodness of God in action in destroying all the works of the devil. The blind see. The deaf hear. The mute speak. The lame walk. Those who are oppressed and possessed are set free. These things are not random miracles. They are intentional acts of God to break the power of evil and suffering in our world.

And the work Jesus is performing here is just the beginning. After His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus pours out His Spirit on the church. The people of God. The Body of Christ. We now are called to go forth – with the same power and authority - to confront the darkness! To defeat evil! To work for the good of the world! This is the commission given to us by our Father! In the beginning. In the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were given dominion over all God had made and sent forth to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with the glory of God. Nothing has changed. God's decision to work through His people remains the same. So you ask what God is doing to defeat evil and relieve suffering in the world? I say look in the mirror! He has put you on this earth to make that happen! He has given you His Spirit to empower you and strengthen you and give you wisdom for the task! He has planted you in your neighborhood. Sent you into your school or workplace. Brought different people into your life and across your path for this very purpose! "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:4) Believe this! And go in God's grace, love and power to defeat the powers of darkness and relieve the hurt and suffering of the world!

October 15, 2018
THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Readings for the day: Matthew 13:1-53, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18

Have you ever wondered what the Kingdom of God is actually like? And how it differs from the kingdoms of this world? In our readings for today, Jesus takes up the subject of the Kingdom and describes it from a number of different angles.

The Kingdom is like a field full of different kinds of soils, some more fruitful than others.

The Kingdom is like a paddock where both wheat and weeds grow up together.

The Kingdom is like the smallest of seeds that blossoms into one of the largest of trees.

The Kingdom is like the little bit of leaven one puts in bread to leaven the whole lump.

The Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field.

The Kingdom is like that one pearl of great price.

The Kingdom is like a net that captures all kinds of fish, some good and some bad.

It is striking how different Jesus' kingdom is from the kingdoms of this world. The world's kingdoms value wealth and power and success. They measure themselves according to their size and influence. Their goal is to achieve as much success as possible. To sit atop the rankings. They jockey for position. They compete with one another. They take delight on another's fall even as they scramble for a higher rung on the proverbial ladder.

Sadly, too many churches fall into this trap as well. We value attendance. The size of our annual budgets. The number of people on staff. The beauty and attractiveness of our property and facilities. We jockey for position on Outreach Magazine's Top 100. We seek to expand our brand by planting churches in communities where many other gospel-preaching churches may already exist. We define success by the number of new attendees even though statistics show they are often transfers from the churches around us. So our "success" is another church's "failure." The American church is particularly susceptible to this line of thinking. I heard a pastor recently argue that we should pull back from missions around the world so we could focus on planting churches in America. After all, he said, imagine what God could do with all the resources we have in this country? As if God needs our resources to accomplish His mission.

I will confess my own failings here as well. It is so tempting for me to focus on the crowd that gathers on a Sunday morning. To dwell on how they receive the message I preach and whether or not they are putting it into practice. I spend a lot of energy daydreaming over what God could do with the resources in my little church family and how that would impact not only Parker but the whole world. If I am not careful, my passion to see God awaken every heart in my congregation spills over into a sinful trust in our strength. Our wealth. Our resources.

I needed this reminder today. As my colleagues and I spend time on retreat, planning out the next season of sermons at PEPC. It is good to be reminded that the Kingdom cannot be measured by the number of people who attend. The number of dollars given. Or our ability to expand our programming and update our facility. The Kingdom is measured in much smaller, more subtle ways. It is the man set free from addiction. The abused woman who finds a listening ear. It is a marriage saved by counseling. A child who invites Jesus into their heart. It is a person going on a mission trip for the very first time. Or volunteering to serve in a classroom even though they feel so inadequate to the task. It is men and women stepping forth to lead and to serve in all sorts of ways. This is what the Kingdom is like. It is often hidden. Often under the radar. Often under the surface. It is messy and complex. Never clean or neat or easy. It is often two steps forward, one step back. The people we think have so much potential often are the most resistant and the people we often overlook become the true heroes and heroines of the faith.

In my experience, good soil is always mixed in with concrete, gravel, thorns and thistles. Wheat is always mixed in with weeds. Mustard seeds often get lost in the shuffle. Leaven disappears into the dough. The treasure sometimes stays hidden for years. Finding that one pearl can take decades. Casting a wide net brings in all kinds of fish. Such is life in the Kingdom and thank God it's not up to me to sort it all out.

October 16, 2018
DESPERATION

Readings for the day: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

I have met Legion. Men and women so tormented and oppressed. I have seen them sitting catatonic in the streets of Harar. I have watched them convulse and tremble behind the bars of a prison cell. I have met them in psych wards where they live for their own protection. Sadly, they feel so cut off from community. So isolated and alone. They feel helpless and afraid. They are desperate for freedom.

I have met the woman with the issue of blood. They live all over the developing world. Without access to basic sanitation and medical care, women are often left to fend for themselves. Their menstrual cycles make them feel cursed. Especially when there are problems. They too feel cut off from their community. Isolated from their families. Helpless and afraid. At the mercy of their biology. They are desperate for freedom.

I have walked with countless families through grief. The loss of someone they love. It's especially tragic when they are young. When they have their whole life ahead of them. The loss of children in particular can make or break a person's faith. I have wept with parents at the bedside of a child dying of cancer. I've been in the hospital room when the doctor delivers the terrible news of a rare and terminal illness. These are incredibly painful and difficult spaces. Those living through them often feel cut off from their community. Isolated from their friends. Helpless and afraid. They are desperate for healing.

What I love most about Jesus is His great compassion. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:36) One can only imagine the pain and suffering He saw as He surveyed the hundreds, even thousands of people who flocked to hear Him speak. He knows their every need. He knows their every desire. He knows their every heartache and heartbreak. He knows how desperate they are for healing. How desperate they are for freedom. And He loves them. He has compassion on them. He reaches out to them. Demons flee. Diseases are cured. The dead are raised. Everywhere Jesus goes, these miraculous signs accompany Him. Everywhere He goes, the Kingdom comes with power and authority. Everywhere He goes, new life breaks forth.

But the needs are too much even for Jesus. He cannot heal every single person. He cannot cast out every single demon. He cannot sit with every family in their grief. So He sends His disciples. They will be His hands and feet. They will minister in His name and under His authority. They will be His ambassadors, Christ making His appeal to the world through them. Christ healing through them. Christ delivering through them.

Our world is still full of desperation. People feel so harassed and helpless. They wander aimlessly through life like sheep without a shepherd. And the question for the church is this...do we have compassion? Are our hearts tenderized by the needs we see all around us? Do we make the time and take the time to come alongside those in pain? Are we willing to re-orient our priorities? Redirect our resources? Re-order our lives in such a way that we make space to care for the lost and lonely who live all around us? This, friends, is what it means to love and follow Jesus.

October 17, 2018
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

Readings for the day: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

What does it mean to be a Christian? Over the years, I've heard a lot of answers to this question. Some think it means they raised their hand and prayed a prayer at some point in their life. Others believe it has to do with the fact they were baptized as an infant. Still others believe it means they go to church every Sunday and pay their tithe. Some of the people I've talked to see it as an inheritance. They were raised by Christian parents so they must be Christian. Others see it as a cultural designation. We live in a Christian nation so we are Christian by default. Like I said, lots of different answers to this all-important question...what does it mean to be a Christian?

Sadly, too many people refuse to look to the Bible for their answer. If they did, they would see Jesus offering a pretty clear definition for what it means to follow Him. First and foremost, you have to have what the ancients might have called "orthopathy" or the "right heart." The people who experienced the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand did not chase Jesus around because they loved Him. No, they wanted their bellies filled again. (A big deal in a 1st century subsistence agricultural economy.) They followed Him for selfish reasons. They wanted their needs met. Their illnesses cured. Their diseases healed. Their wants satisfied. And that's why Jesus tells them He is the bread of life. The food they are seeking is not temporal. Their needs are not just physical. They are spiritual and eternal and only the Christ can satisfy them but they must believe. They must have faith. This is what Jesus means when He talks about feasting on His body and drinking His blood and it was too much for some. They turned away. Even many of His disciples stopped following Him. Why? They did not believe. They did not trust. They could not accept the truth of what Jesus was teaching. They did not have the right heart.

The second thing we learn about following Jesus is that it takes "orthodoxy" or "right teaching." Jesus is who He says He is! He gets to define Himself. He gets to reveal Himself. We don't get to accept parts of Jesus and reject others. We don't get to reduce Jesus down to our size. We don't get to make Him comfortable or safe. Jesus is God. He is Lord over disease. Lord over death. Lord over sin. Lord over evil. Lord over this world and all that is in it. He casts out demons. He heals the sick. He messes with the atomic structure of bread and fish to feed five thousand people! He walks on water. He calms the wind and the waves. He is the bread of life. He is the manna from heaven. He alone has the words of eternal life. All of these different events may seem strung together randomly but they are not! They are designed to give the disciples. Give His followers. Give those who believe and trust in Him a true picture of Himself. Jesus wanted them to understand the true nature of His divinity. He wasn't just another prophet or miracle-worker. He was God Himself. True Christians take Jesus at His Word. They accept Him for who He is. They do not try to replace Him with a Jesus of their own making. Right thinking about Jesus is essential for the Christian.

Finally, there is "orthopraxy" or right practice. True Christians live what they believe. Their works flow from a heart that is full of faith. The disciples believed and were given authority to go forth and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Preach a message of repentance. Heal the sick. Cast out unclean spirits. These are the "right practices" that should mark the life of every believer to a greater or lesser extent depending on where one is on their journey.

As Christians, we do not get to pick and choose. We do not get to claim a right heart and hold to a heretical theology. We do not get to claim a right theology and live a heretical life. We do not get to claim a righteous life and yet cling to a hardened heart. It's an all or nothing deal. Now, are we perfect? Of course not. Is there room to grow in every Christian's life? Absolutely. Is following Christ a journey? Complete with ups and downs? Doubts and fears? Successes and failures? Yes! Yes! And yes! But over the course of time. As days turn to weeks turn to months turn to years, we should be able to see the growth. Our hearts and minds and lives should reflect more and more of Jesus.

October 18, 2018
FOLLOW YOUR HEART?

Readings for the day: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

"But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person." (Matthew 15:18-20)

I hear it all the time. Do what feels good. Do what feels right. Follow your heart. Be true to yourself. These platitudes sound so promising until one actually decides to act on them. If one chooses to follow one's heart, one quickly ends up in a ditch. Why? Our hearts are broken. Our hearts are corrupt. Our hearts are filled with all kinds of evil thoughts and intentions. Evil? Really? Perhaps you think "evil" is too strong of a word. Okay. Try selfish. I think most of us would agree that our natural way of operating is to take care of ourselves first. Make sure our own needs get met first. Fulfill our own desires before we give or serve others. Our culture reinforces this idea. Put yourself first. Take care of yourself. You deserve a break. Make yourself your first priority. Unfortunately, the American church uncritically blesses this mindset as well. I love what a Korean pastor, Jay Kim, recently wrote, "The uniquely American emphasis of the gospel is seeing faith as a means to personal benefit, rather than a sacrificing of personal benefits for eternal rewards."

Jesus is clear. We are NOT the center of the universe. Our hearts are NOT pure. Our hands are NOT clean. Our desires are oriented inward rather than outward and result in a defilement that affects the whole person. This is why behavior management is no substitute for the gospel. We cannot work from the outside in. We must work from the inside out. Our hearts have to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Renewed and restored by the indwelling presence of God Himself. Only then will our lives begin to reflect His true glory. The reality is too many Christians are working far too hard at cleaning the outside of the cup. Making sure they live morally upright lives. They major in the minors. And it ends up crippling our witness.

Christ wants our hearts. He will not settle for less. It doesn't matter if you are a Pharisee. A disciple. Or a Syrophenician woman. It doesn't matter whether you are sick or well. Free or oppressed. Rich or poor. Christ wants your heart. He wants to transform you from the inside out. He wants your love and devotion far more than your outward obedience to His commands. As good and as holy as His commandments are, they cannot serve as a pathway to righteousness. Only Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And it is only by faith that we can live truly and wholly for Him.

October 19, 2018
REAL LIFE IN GOD' KINGDOM

Readings for the day: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

(Inspired by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch and their book, ReJesus)

A man trudges up the dusty road. His feet are tired. His sandals are worn through. His robes are torn in several places. His face is streaked with sweat. His hair is more salt than pepper. He's got scars all over his body. He limps. He's hunched over in chronic pain. His eyes glance up at the sign above the door. An inn. A place to rest his weary bones. He opens the door and walks in. Orders a drink. Orders a bit of food. Finds a place at an open table and waits. Several minutes later, the door opens again. The man at the table waves him over. He comes and sits. Tells the waiter, "I'll have what he's having."

"How are you doing, Paul?" Peter asks. "You look tired."

"I am at that", Paul replies. "I've been shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and left for dead. My right arm barely works anymore. My left hip will never be the same. My back aches every morning. I've traveled more miles than I dare to count."

"You definitely have logged some hours, brother. The reports we hear back in Jerusalem about the churches you've planted and the cities you've reached with the gospel are a great encouragement. As are the funds you've raised to help sustain us in our suffering. But how are you doing? How's your heart these days?" Peter asks.

"About the same as yours, I imagine. The Corinthians are fighting among themselves. The Galatians are abandoning the true faith. I am being attacked by fellow Christians. My leadership is being questioned. I fear all this work has been for naught. What about you? How are you feeling these days?" Paul responds.

"Life in Jerusalem is still incredibly hard. We are persecuted by both the Romans and the Jews. Everywhere we go, we have targets on our backs. They kick down the doors where we gather. They drag us before the Sanhedrin. They throw us in jail. You probably heard about James? Herod got hold of him. It was ugly. His death was a huge blow to us all." Peter shares.

"What keeps you going?" Paul asks. Peter replies, "I keep thinking back to that day when Jesus asked us, 'Who do you say that I am?' I'm not sure where the words came from but almost without thinking I said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!' Jesus told us this revelation did not come from man but from our Father in heaven and He went on to say that He would build His church on the rock of this confession. Initially people thought He might mean me. My name means "pebble" after all! But just look at me! I'm no rock. I'm about as broken and worn down as they come."

"Yeah, and if what I hear is true, you tried to stop Jesus from talking about the cross?" Paul says with a smirk. Peter smiles ruefully. "Not my finest moment." Paul claps Peter on the back. "We've all been there, my friend."

Peter goes on, "You know, in my darkest moments when it seems like I just can't go on, I think of Him. Hanging on that cross. Gasping for breath. Struggling for life. I think of the morning I ran to the tomb and found it empty. I think of Him appearing to me after His resurrection. Forgiving me for abandoning Him and calling me back into ministry. All of my struggles. All of my suffering. All of my pain. All of my heartaches and disappointments. All my fears and failures. It's all been worth it, you know? Just for the sake of knowing and serving Him." Tears start running down Paul's face. He whispers, "I know exactly what you're saying. I wouldn't trade that moment

outside of Damascus for the world. Everything I've done and everywhere I've been since that day has been an absolute privilege. But I have to confess, I sure wish I could have been there with you. To walk with Him and talk with Him." Peter reaches out and grabs his hand. "You are with us now. That's all that matters."

Imagine sitting at the next table, watching this exchange. Watching these two giants of the faith swap stories and encourage each other. Imagine them praying together before they leave, not knowing if this would be the last time they would see each other. Who knows if such a meeting ever took place? What I do know is this...for two thousand years, faithful men and women have taken these words of Jesus to heart. "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25) They have braved all kinds of dangers. Faced all kinds of persecution. Suffered beyond belief. They have paid the ultimate price in many cases all to bring the gospel to the world. In so doing, they have received a crown of glory not worth comparing to the struggles of this world. They have given up fame and fortune but gained an eternal inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. By their testimony, the church has been founded and established in this world. And the gates of hell don't stand a chance.

October 20, 2018
GREATNESS

Readings for the day: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:1-4)

We all want to be great. We all want to be known. We all want to be significant. So we chase our dreams. We chase power and wealth and influence and fame. In large or small ways, we all desire success. Achievement. Recognition. We want to be the best. Finish first. Get to the top of whatever mountain we're trying to climb. We want respect. We want the people around us to think highly of us. We want to be able to look in the mirror and be proud of what we see.

The same was true for the disciples. They signed on – or so they thought - to this new kingdom movement. They believed Jesus was the Messiah. They believed He was the Christ. And for them, Jews living in the 2nd Temple period of Israel's history, this could only mean one thing. Jesus would lead a revolution. He would cleanse the Temple. Toss out the religious elites. Overthrow the Romans. Re-establish the throne of David. Win Israel's independence from foreign powers. This is what had happened throughout their history and they wanted in on the ground floor when it happened again. God bringing about deliverance and salvation through His Chosen One.

So they asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It's a loaded question. Freighted with all kinds of cultural and relational baggage. On a personal level, they are asking for themselves. Which of us is the greatest? Which of us will get to sit at your right hand? On a cultural level, they are asking for discernment to find out who's in and who's out. Who among the crowds that are following them are worthy to be part of this new kingdom? And who do we need to keep out? On a political level, they want to know who will hold the power and positions of influence in this new kingdom? What cabinet positions will we occupy once you've established your rule and reign? They want to know so they can prepare. They want to know so they can start jockeying for position. They're probably looking around at each other, measuring the competition.

Jesus' response had to be mystifying. The humblest are the greatest? The last are the first? The least have the most? We have to become like children to enter in? Remember, in that culture, children were non-persons. More like property. They had no rights. No freedoms. At the same time, children were deeply loved. Showered with affection. They were considered God's greatest blessing for a family. So what is it about children that makes them so great?

First and foremost, trust. Children, especially when very young, find it easy to trust. They accept what their parents say without question. If you tell them the sun will rise at midnight, they will wake up fully expecting it to happen. They believe easily. They are not skeptical. At least not until they get older. They've not had all the life experiences that can make us cynical and bitter. They see the world through rose-colored glasses. They believe the best about those around them. And this is what Jesus wants from His disciples as well.

Second, humility. Little children do not harbor ambition. They do not need to be rich and famous. They do not grasp for power or influence or authority. They are not wrapped up in achievement or success. They are not self-conscious or even self-aware. Self has no place in their thinking at all! I believe it was CS Lewis who once said something like "true humility is not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. Nor is it thinking less

of yourself than you ought. It is simply thinking of your “self” less.” This comes naturally to a child and Jesus wants it to come naturally to His disciples.

Third, wonder. Children live with a sense of wonder and awe at the world around them. They love to explore. They love to adventure. They are naturally curious. Naturally inquisitive. They want to know why thinks work they way they do or why things are the way they are. I remember when my four children went through their “why” phase. Every question. Every day. For weeks on end. Why this? Why that? Why? Why? Why? Sure, it got annoying but when I stepped back, I could see the wonder underlying it all. They simply wanted to know more about this grand world in which we live.

There are probably many more lessons we can draw from our passage this morning but I have to believe Jesus – coming off His transfiguration moment – wanted to cement in His disciple’s hearts the truth of His Kingdom. It would not be like the kingdoms of this world. It would not be run like the kingdoms of this world. It would not hold to the same values of the kingdoms of this world. It would be radically different. Wholly other. And their entrance into such a kingdom would come only as they left their old lives behind and embraced the new life Jesus offers in Himself.

October 22, 2018
ACCEPTANCE VS. AFFIRMATION

Readings for the day: John 7, 8, 9

"Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." (John 8:10-11)

We've all probably heard the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." I don't know about you but I have not found it all that helpful. First of all, those who do not believe are not convinced they are "sinners" and tend to resent the moniker. Second, it's really hard to do. Separating one's behavior from one's identity is growing more and more difficult in our world. In fact, there are many who would argue it is impossible. And yet Jesus seemed to do it.

The beginning of John 8 is a famous story. Maybe one of the most famous in all of Scripture. And though it's origin is questionable – it doesn't appear in the earliest and best manuscripts - it just sounds like Jesus so we tend to keep it in. A woman caught in the very act of adultery is brought before Jesus. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are almost gleeful in their condemnation. They can't wait to pick up the first stone. They throw her down before Him, pretty convinced He will have mercy which in turn will allow them to accuse Him of breaking the Law. Of course, anyone familiar with the Law can already see the problems. If they caught this woman in the act, where is the man? According to Leviticus 20:10 both parties deserve the death penalty. Perhaps that's what Jesus is writing in the dust? If they caught her in the act, why have they not carried out her punishment? The Law is clear. Perhaps it's because they don't really care about her crime but are far more concerned with trapping Jesus?

Then Jesus does this extraordinary thing. He puts the onus back on them. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." He hasn't condemned her nor has He affirmed her. He hasn't condemned the Pharisees nor has He affirmed them. Instead, Jesus brilliantly lobs the ball back in their court and forces them to make their own decision. The Pharisees put down their stones and slowly walk away. The woman is left all alone, prompting this famous exchange. "Woman, has no one condemned you?" "No one, Lord." "Nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

I simply love this about Jesus. He accepts people for who they are but loves them too much to leave them there. He meets us right where we are, takes us by the hand, and leads us to a better place. He accepts us, warts and all, without affirming our sin. To the Pharisee, he says, "Are you really without sin?" To those caught in sin, he says, "I do not condemn you." And to both, he says, "Go and sin no more."

As Christians, there is a lot in this world we simply cannot affirm. Changing attitudes in gender and sexuality. Abortion on demand. Racism and sexual abuse. Deceit and falsehood. Anger and hate. These things are not of God and yet so many embrace them. Defend them. Use them as means to a greater end. The answer cannot be rejection. Jesus simply will not allow us to walk away from anyone, including our enemies. So we must find a way – as Jesus found a way - to accept people for who they are without affirming their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. Thankfully, this is the heart of the gospel. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were enemies of God, Christ made peace with us. While we were pushing Him away, Christ embraced us. May the Spirit give us the courage to do the same!

October 23, 2018
LISTENING TO JESUS

Readings for the day: Luke 10, John 10, 11:1-54

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

Noise. There's a lot of it in our lives. From the moment our alarm clocks go off until we finally put down the phone or turn off the television at the end of the night, our lives are full of noise. So many voices. Telling us all kinds of things. Much of it not good for us. The bully at school who tells us we're worthless. The co-worker who's so negative all the time. The spouse who badgers or berates us. The child who screams when they don't get their way. The commercials that tempt us to think life is all about us. The subliminal messages coming through on social media that constantly invite comparison. The news outlets spinning world events to bolster a particular worldview. The proliferation of fake news, gossip, and a rumor mill run wild. And, in the middle of it all, the still small voice of God whispering continually to our hearts.

Can you hear Him? Can you hear His voice? Amidst all the noise and distractions? When was the last time you sat in silence? I mean true silence. No one around. No devices present to distract. No radio. No television. Just you and God sitting in silence together. “My sheep hear my voice...” Perhaps one of the main reasons we struggle so much with our faith is we do not take the time to listen for God's voice. We expect Him to compete with all the other voices in our lives. Shout them down. Yell over the top of them. We expect Him to make Himself known to us but we refuse to create space in our lives for that to happen. Instead, we expect Him to push His way in. Elbow His way to the front of the line. Then and only then will we turn and acknowledge Him.

Jesus doesn't work that way. There's a great story from the Old Testament about a man named Elijah. He went out to meet with God. A great storm whipped up. God wasn't in the storm. A great fire raged. God wasn't in the fire. A great earthquake shook the very ground. God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a still small voice. Elijah covered his head. He knew he was hearing the voice of God. “My sheep hear my voice...” Do you want to hear the voice of God? Make time for solitude and silence in your life.

For me, this often comes at the end of the day. My children are in bed. My wife as well. I sit in my favorite chair in the living room. Nothing is on. I read God's Word. I meditate. I pray. I think back over the events of my day. The people I met. The conversations I had. The work I was able to accomplish. I pay close attention to how I experienced each moment. And I lay those feelings before the Lord. I ponder what's to come the following day. What am I excited about? Nervous about? Who will I be meeting with and how can I serve them? What challenges will I be facing and how do they make me feel? All of these things I simply lay before Lord and ask Him to speak into them. Sometimes He does. Sometimes He simply reaches out and takes my hand. Let's me know He'll be with me no matter what.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. They follow me. There's nothing more comforting than walking through life with the Good Shepherd at your side.

October 24, 2018
PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Readings for the day: Luke 12-13:30

One of the real benefits of coming to Africa is learning to think in different ways. Ethiopia is an honor-shame culture like much of the rest of the world. What this means is they tend to think collectively instead of individually. Morality is determined relationally rather than internally. The focus is not so much on how to get something right as it is to honor the person and/or community in the process.

The Bible is written in an honor-shame cultural context. It cannot be fully understood apart from this. The stories Jesus tells are less “morality tales” and more about how to honor God and one another through the gospel. The story of the rich fool is a prime example of what I’m talking about. The traditional interpretation is that the man placed his trust in his riches. His sin was to build bigger barns. He was greedy and therefore fell under God’s judgment. But a close reading from the honor-shame perspective reveals even deeper truths.

What was the man’s primary sin? What was it that would have been obvious to everyone listening to Jesus that day? It was when he said, “I know what I will do...” His refusal to honor the community was his major mistake. Whenever a person had a bumper crop in the 1st century, he would make his way down to the village gate to seek advice from the elders. He would tell of the abundant blessings God had poured out on him and he would ask them what he should do. They would deliberate and discuss but eventually would suggest things like making an extravagant offering to the Lord, throwing a party so the whole village could celebrate, and giving to the poor. The man would then go out and do all these things in an effort to bring honor to his community. If, after giving to God and giving to the poor and throwing a party, he still had too much for his current barns to hold then perhaps it would be time to throw up new barns. Perhaps the whole community would come out to help. And everyone would experience the blessing.

As American Christians, we tend to think far too individualistically and we tend to read the Bible far too individualistically. We turn everything into a personal morality tale and while that isn’t all bad, it certainly doesn’t get to the heart of the gospel. When Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden, they realized they were naked and immediately felt ashamed. The heart of the story from Genesis 3 onward is of a God who is on a mission to remove our shame. Remove our guilt. Remove our sin. He seeks to cover our shame with His own honor and that’s why Jesus tells the stories He does. This is the central message at the heart of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It’s the primary driver behind this parable of the rich fool and so many others like it. Jesus takes all His divine honor and glory and gives it away to tax collectors and prostitutes and other sinners.

How then do we respond? We respond the way a tax collector named Zaccheus did. He gave away half of his possessions and made restitution to those he had defrauded. We respond the way a prostitute did, breaking a jar of costly ointment – her most prized possession – over Jesus’ head in an extravagant act of devotion. We respond the way the first disciples did, leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus. This is how who have been honored by God seek to honor Him in return.

October 25, 2018
THE LEAST AND THE LOST

Readings for the day: Luke 14-15

Jesus loves the least and the lost. It's why he heals on the Sabbath. Tells stories of feasts where the poor, the blind, the crippled and the lame become guests of honor. It's the king who is rejected by his friends so sends his servants out to the highways and byways to bring in those who are the least worthy of his attention. It's a lost sheep that is found. A lost coin that is rediscovered. And two lost sons who are restored. These are the ways of the Kingdom of God and followers of Jesus will seek to walk in these ways themselves.

Do you love the least and the lost? Or do you instead seek a place of honor and glory for yourself? Are you like the man who went to the banquet and took the seat of highest honor for himself? Are you like the invited guests who made all kinds of excuses as to why they couldn't come or had to delay their attendance at the great wedding feast? Are there things in your life that you love more than Jesus? Including your own family? If so, beware! You are like salt that has lost its saltiness.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate...even his own life cannot be my disciple."

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

"So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

These are hard sayings to be sure. They do not make any sense from a human perspective. We cannot imagine why the call to follow Jesus would be so costly. And yet, Jesus clearly leaves us no wiggle room. Why? Is it because Jesus is cruel? Is it because Jesus is capricious? Uncaring? Is it because Jesus is a tyrant? The answer is a clear "NO" to all of these things. It is because Jesus is 110% committed to His mission to reach the least and the lost of our world. Those who live at the bottom of society. Those who struggle and suffer and for whom life is full of pain and heartbreak. God loves them with an everlasting love and His great desire is to see them lifted up. See them blessed. See them healed and made whole.

He has one plan to accomplish this great end. His church. His people. Those who are called by His name and set apart for His purposes. Why must we relinquish all in order to follow Jesus? It is so He can use us as He sees fit. Send us where He needs us. Take our resources and deploy them for His purposes in the world. Our response must be open hands and open hearts. A humble willingness to let God use us as He sees fit. Only then will we find true fulfillment and true joy. Only then will we experience the peace that passes all understanding. Only then will we know the unconditional love and grace of God in our lives.

October 26, 2018
THREADING THE NEEDLE

Readings for the day: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16-18:30

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:25)

Honestly, I think this is one of the most difficult passages in all the Scriptures. Why? Because I am rich. By the world's standards. (www.globalrichlist.com) By historical standards. I am one of the richest people to have ever lived on the face of the earth. I am not only in the top 1% but am in the top tenth of a percent of the wealthiest people to have ever walked the planet. So when Jesus says it is harder for a person like me to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, it is terrifying. It sounds impossible.

So what's a person like me to do? Where can I find hope? First and foremost, I find hope in Mark's version of the story because he includes this wonderful little nugget in verse 21. "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him..." Jesus loved the rich young ruler. He had compassion on the man. He saw the internal struggle in his eyes. Saw how much he wanted to please God and yet saw the hold his riches had over him. Jesus doesn't hate rich people. Jesus doesn't hate me. The accumulation of wealth is not, in itself, a barrier to God's love. And for that I am thankful.

Second, Jesus gives me a practical way forward. "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The path Jesus offers is the path of generosity. Give as much as I can away to those who are less fortunate. Use my wealth to bless others. Hold loosely onto the resources God has entrusted into my hands and let them be the tools God uses to expand His Kingdom in this world. In this way, I will guard my heart from the sin of falling in love with money. Trusting my riches. I cannot serve both God and money so I need to make a choice and I need to make this choice every single day because I live in constant temptation. Loving money more than God puts me in real spiritual danger so heeding Jesus' command here is vital.

Third, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." God is mighty to save. The least. The lost. The rich. The powerful. There is no one who stands beyond the reach of His grace. Salvation ultimately will not be determined by the amount of money I give but by the grace that is given freely to me in Jesus Christ.

Finally, I need to take these words of Jesus to heart. Let them re-orient my desires. Let them re-order my priorities. Let them re-define success and achievement in my life. "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Many years ago, I suffered a massive failure. Professionally. Personally. It was traumatic. It almost cost me my marriage and my ministry. Thankfully, God used the trauma of that experience to strip my life down to the studs. The result was a brand new outlook. A deep awareness of my own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Love of money is one of those. So is success. As a result, I felt God calling me to never ask for another raise and never seek another position professionally but instead to walk with open hands, trusting Him to take care of me. Over the last ten years, God has more than delivered on His promises. My life has been enriched in every way imaginable. And I have learned to live in the overwhelming abundance of His grace.

October 27, 2018
TWO KEY PRINCIPLES

Readings for the day: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-43, 19:1-27

"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

I often wonder how different the world would look if followers of Jesus would take just these two verses literally. Can you imagine the impact we would make if we had the courage to serve as the Son of Man served and seek as the Son of Man sought? Perhaps that's why I love coming to Ethiopia so much. Here I get the opportunity to see this kind of faithfulness in action.

I think of Lydia. A 22 year old woman with two babies who ministers in a Muslim village outside of Dire Dawa. Everyday she travels the streets of her town on foot preaching the gospel in the open air. She suffers verbal and sometimes physical abuse. She has put her life and the lives of her family at risk. But she considers it a privilege to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. God has honored her faithfulness! Street women are coming to faith and leaving behind their former lives of prostitution. Her description of their desperation and the hope they find in Jesus is powerful.

I think of Gedesa. A young man of 25 who is single and serving in among the Muslim and Orthodox in a village 300 kilometers away near Harar. He longs to get married and have a family but has delayed those dreams so he can serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. He gets attacked. Both Muslims and Orthodox are aggressive in their abuse. They disrupt his preaching. They pay his converts to recant. But still he persists. It is inspiring.

I think of Yitsgelu. A Somali man who converted to Christ out of Islam. His family publicly shamed him and drove him from their village. He came to Dire Dawa to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. His denomination sent him to a suburb of the city where he ministers among the Muslims, bringing many to Christ. It is not easy work as they suffer just like he suffered. Their families disown them. Their community abandons them. They often lose their jobs. But God is using Yitsgelu's own story to bring redemption in the name of Jesus.

These are just a few of the stories I've heard this week and there are so many more to share. God is moving in this part of the country. Over the last two years, over 360 churches have been planted and over 219 thousand people have heard the gospel for the first time! As a result, over 14 thousand have given their lives to Christ in an area that is 98% Muslim. All because a few hundred church planters decided to take Jesus seriously. Like the Son of Man, they've come to serve the least and seek the lost.

October 29, 2018
ANSWERED PRAYER

Readings for the day: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36

"And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." (Matthew 21:21-22)

I am sure we all have things we've prayed over for years. Prayers for loved ones to come to faith. Prayers for those we care about to be healed. Prayers for direction. Wisdom. Guidance on decisions. Prayers for sin to be rooted out of our lives. Prayers for provision. Prayers for protection. Prayers for opportunities. If you are like me, you read a passage like today and you begin to wonder...do I not have enough faith? Is the reason my prayers aren't being answered my doubts? My fears? My sin?

What does it mean to "have faith?" In my experience, far too many of us equate faith with our feelings. We struggle with faith if we aren't feeling an emotional high during worship. We struggle with faith if we read the Bible and don't feel something. We struggle with faith if we pray and don't sense God's abiding presence. Still others of us equate faith with belief. Our mental assent to the notion that Jesus is who He says He is. We believe He lived. Died. Rose again. And while these certainly are aspects of faith – because we are to love God with all our hearts and minds – they do not represent the sum total of what Jesus is talking about here when he calls his disciples to "have faith."

Having faith means placing our trust in the Father's will. It means surrendering to His ways and His plans. It means setting His desires above our own. It represents a complete and total commitment to God no matter how we may feel or what we may think. Jesus trusted His Father. Jesus had faith. And what marked the faith of Jesus was the fact that He did nothing outside the will of His Father. He only did what His Father willed. Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life like the one He will pray in Gethsemane...not my will but Thine be done? Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life where He asked the Father to let the cup pass Him by? On the surface, it appears the Father didn't answer those prayers. So does this mean Jesus didn't have enough faith? No. Quite the opposite. Jesus trusted completely in His Father and was willing to do whatever His Father willed so He relinquished His own will. His own thoughts. His own desires. And the Father used Him to "move mountains into the heart of the sea" as the power of sin was broken and death defeated.

Jesus had faith. And because He had faith, He always...ALWAYS...asked for the Father's will to be done in His life. When Jesus encourages His disciples that "whatever they ask for" they will receive, He assumes they will be asking for the Father's will just as He has been asking for the Father's will throughout the course of His own life and ministry. This is a baseline assumption when it comes to prayer. It is foundational to true Christian prayer. When we come before the Father, we do not come simply to present our requests or ask God to bless our will and our way. We come boldly but humbly before His throne. We come with confidence and a surrendered heart knowing the Father already knows what's best for us. We come not with clenched fists but with open hands to whatever the Father desires for our lives. We lift our loved ones up to Him, trusting in His gracious election. We lift those we care about up to Him, trusting Him for healing in this life or the next. We pray for His wisdom to understand our circumstances. We ask for His strength to root out sin in our lives, knowing all the while that His grace is sufficient for us and His power is made perfect in our weakness. This is what it means to "have faith" when we pray.

October 30, 2018
LET GOD BE GOD

Readings for the day: Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, Mark 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

“Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.” (John 12:39-40)

“For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14)

These are some difficult words to hear. How is it that God would choose some and not others? How is it that God would open the eyes of some and not others? How is it God would regenerate some hearts and not others? How is it that God would actively blind eyes and harden hearts to the message of the gospel? Matthew even takes it a step further. Many are called but few are chosen? Is God playing some cosmic game of “duck, duck, goose?” Is that how salvation works?

I will not pretend to probe the mysteries of divine election in this post. Nor will I seek to untangle the Gordian knot of predestination vs. free will. I imagine that debate will last until Jesus’ return. Perhaps even beyond. It is not given to us to understand these things, only to accept them. And this is where our faith is put to the test. Do we believe God is good? Do we believe God is wise? Do we believe God is true? Do we believe God has a plan? Do we believe God is worthy? Do we believe God is righteous? All these things are called into question the very moment we read verses like these and think to ourselves “this doesn’t seem fair.”

It is a dangerous thing to question the nature and character of God. It is a fearful thing for the clay to say to the Potter, why have you made me thus? It is arrogant to demand God give an account to us or answer to our flawed notions of justice or meet our democratic standards of fairness. This is where growing up in America where our leaders must answer to the will of the people hurts us. Our cultural context works against us as we read. God is no democratically elected leader. He is our King. Our Lord. Our Sovereign. He created the universe and all that is in it. We are dust. We are ashes. We are nothing and it is only because God has decided to set His love on us that we are worth anything at all. It is only because God decided to make us in His image that we have dignity and honor. But these things are not our own! They are conveyed to us by God Himself for His own mysterious purposes.

So what if God – desiring to make known His power and reveal His glory – decided to make some vessels for honor and some for dishonor? What if God – desiring to make known His justice and righteousness – raises up some for glory and others for destruction? Does this make God unjust? Does this make God unfair? Does this call into question God’s goodness and righteousness? If we are honest, there can be only one answer. What right do we – created beings one and all – have to question our Creator? As the Apostle Paul says, “What right does the clay have to question the Potter?”

Here is where the rubber meets the road when we talk about surrender. Submission. Sacrifice. We lay it all in His hands. We give it all to Him. He alone is worthy of all glory and honor and power because He stands outside time and space and creation. He is far removed from any of our human notions of justice and righteousness. He does not answer to His creation. Furthermore, humility demands that we accept the fact that He sees far more than any of us do. He has an eternal perspective we cannot grasp. His wisdom is infinite and His knowledge without end. What seems paradoxical to us is logical to Him. What seems contradictory to us makes perfect sense for Him. What seems impossible to us is well within the bounds of His authority and rule and reign. At the end of the day it comes down to this...God is God and we are not. We reject this simple truth at our own peril.

October 31, 2018
PUTTING GOD TO THE TEST

Readings for the day: Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35

Let me start by saying God welcomes honest, heart-felt questions. God loves nothing more than comforting His people when they come before Him confused and hurting. Struggling to understand. Trying to make sense of life and tragedy and suffering. He understands our doubts and fears. He can handle our anger and frustration. When we are honestly seeking Him. Honestly asking Him. Honestly and transparently and vulnerably bringing all our insecurities before Him, He gently gathers us in His arms and lets us know it will be okay. He is with us. He is here for us. He will never leave us or forsake us.

However...if we set out to test God. To put Him on the witness stand and demand He answer to our notions of what is right and good. If we put Him on trial and require Him to answer to our human notions of justice. If we doubt His integrity and character and nature. If we push Him and press Him and seek to discredit Him. We are playing a very dangerous game. One that places our eternal souls in jeopardy.

The religious rulers of the day had no interest in following Jesus. Their only aim was to discredit Him before the eyes of the people. They were seeking to trip Him up with their questions. They wanted to make a public spectacle of Him. Humiliate Him in the eyes of the people. Stamp out His ministry and movement and send Him back to Nazareth in disgrace. Their questions are designed to get Him in trouble politically – “is it lawful to pay taxes or not?” Their questions serve as impossible riddles – “a woman married seven times goes to heaven... whose wife will she be?” Their questions present logical impossibilities – “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” But Jesus is not limited to human understanding. His answers reveal a divine wisdom that silences those who would seek to destroy Him. Then Jesus goes on the offensive, exposing their hypocrisy. They are the ones in violation of the Law! They are the ones who lack understanding! They are the ones who play political games! Woe to you scribes and Pharisees! Judgment is coming!

It's sobering to say the least. And it forces us to self-reflection. What lies at the heart of my own questions? An honest desire to understand? Or a selfish desire to justify my own actions? A tender insecurity for which I need God's comfort? Or an arrogant desire to go my own way and do my own thing? A doubt or a fear that keeps me from experiencing the peace that passes all understanding? Or a sinful desire to cling to an idol in my life? What is it that drives my questions? What lies at the heart of my doubts and fears and confusion? Am I putting God on trial or am I truly seeking His will?